

Paralegal Honored for Aiding Homeless; Pa. Agency Lauds Conestoga Woman

P. J. Reilly

If Valerie G. Case could achieve one more goal before she retires, she said she would like to see "homelessness as we know it" eradicated in Lancaster County.

"The Lancaster Interagency Council for the Homeless is in the early stages of its 10-year plan to end homelessness," Case said. "I'd really like to see that plan fully implemented before I retire."

Working toward such a lofty goal as a paralegal with the Lancaster office of MidPenn Legal Services is what earned Case, 52, of Conestoga, the Pennsylvania Legal Services Center's Striving for Excellence Award Tuesday.

The award is given each year to an outstanding and dedicated employee in the state's legal services field.

Serving much of central and south central Pennsylvania, MidPenn Legal Services provides legal assistance with civil cases to people with low incomes.

Case has worked in the field since 1969, when a legal services agency was first opened to serve Lancaster, York and Reading. Various small organizations merged over the years to form the agency, which serves 18 counties.

As a paralegal, Case spends much of her time helping people who can't afford legal services obtain medical, housing, Social Security and other benefits from the government.

"There must be something in all of us that needs to be needed," Case said. "Giving back people their dignity, letting them have peace in their lives, is a definite reward for me."

Case said the passion to help others was instilled in her in 1973 by Vicki Powell, a paralegal who trained Case to work with low-income and disabled clients.

"Back then, there was no formal training in something like this,"

she said. "Vicki taught us how to talk to these people without talking down to them. She taught us how to treat them with dignity."

Case's dedication to helping others doesn't end at her office door.

From 1983 to 1985, she was a civil committee board member of National Legal Aid and Defender Association. She was public sector chair of National Federation of Paralegal Associations from 1984 to 1988.

And she was a board member of the Nationwide Employee Benefits Organization from 1984 to 1988.

From 1990 to 1995, Case managed Lancaster Legal Services Office and has served intermittently as manager since 1998.

Since 1994, Case has been involved with the formation and development of Lancaster Interagency Council for the Homeless.

The council is comprised of more than 30 local organizations that meet on a volunteer basis to learn about new programs and discuss the unmet needs of the homeless and how to address them.

The council helps homeless people get food and clothing, enter drug and alcohol treatment and employment programs and find housing.

"One of the most inspiring aspects of my work is the people around me," Case said. "When you work with people who are as dedicated as my colleagues, it's contagious."